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Trabajo de Fin de Grado

Subverting the Traditional Mother's Role in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987)

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ABSTRACT [EN]

In this paper I shall examine how Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) subverts the concept of African American traditional motherhood and how violence becomes an expression of the purest form of maternal love which ultimately proves to be fatal. Morrison considers literature to be the most potent means of challenging the cultural and historical marginalization to which African American women have been subjected to for ages. The female protagonist of the novel, a former slave, Sethe uses violence to assert her identity and refuses to be simply seen as a reproductive vessel, a role which is assigned to her by a patriarchal and racist society. Hence, violence becomes a tool through which she is able to define herself as an autonomous and independent being. Sethe's character demonstrates the harmful effects of slavery on the development of African Americans' identity and their sense of self-worth. In order to explain the notion of self-perception among African Americans I refer to W. E. B. DuBois' theory of double consciousness. *Beloved* takes us on a thought provoking journey to a horrifying past in American history which provides us with a keen insight into slavery thereby enabling us to approach still prevalent racist issues in a more well-informed manner. Additionally, *Beloved* attempts to heal the scars of slavery on African American bodies and minds and encourages the construction of a positive sense of self-perception among blacks by discarding the belief that African Americans are inferior to the whites because of their race.

KEY WORDS: dehumanization, double consciousness, DuBois, coloured feminism, marginalization, Morrison, motherhood, racism, sexism, slave narratives, slavery, violence.

RESUMEN [ES]

En este ensayo examino cómo *Beloved* (1987) de Toni Morrison subvierte el concepto tradicional de la maternidad en las afroamericanas y cómo la violencia se convierte en la más pura expresión del amor maternal que adquiere un tono fatídico. Morrison considera que la literatura es el recurso más contundente para desafiar la marginación histórica y cultural a la que las mujeres afroamericanas han sido sujetas durante décadas. La protagonista de la novela, una ex esclava, Sethe, usa la violencia para reafirmar su identidad y rehúsa a ser considerada meramente como un recipiente reproductivo, un rol que le ha sido asignado por una sociedad patriarcal y racista. Por consiguiente, la violencia se convierte en la herramienta a través de la cual Sethe se define como un ser autónomo e independiente. El personaje de Sethe muestra los dañinos efectos de la esclavitud en el desarrollo de la identidad y la autoestima afroamericana. Para explicar la percepción que la comunidad afroamericana tiene de sí misma me remito a la teoría de la doble consciencia de W. E. B. DuBois. *Beloved* nos induce a pensar en ese horripilante pasado de la historia americana y nos provee con una percepción aguda de la esclavitud haciendo posible aproximarnos a los problemas racistas actuales con conocimiento de causa. Además, *Beloved* intenta sanar las heridas de la esclavitud infligidas tanto en los cuerpos como en las mentes de los afroamericanos y estimula la construcción de una percepción favorable de la comunidad negra descartando la creencia de que los afroamericanos son inferiores a los blancos por su raza.

PALABRAS CLAVES: deshumanización, doble consciencia, DuBois, feminismo negro, marginación, Morrison, maternidad, racismo, sexismo, narrativas de esclavos, esclavitud, violencia.

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INTRODUCTION

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) can be considered the foundation of 20th century African American literature. This novel in which motherhood and slavery converge brings forth a grave issue which both African Americans and Americans try to ignore and forget: slavery and its traces (Razmi and Yamali 116). Therefore, *Beloved*, Sethe's daughter, becomes a means through which the historical past of slavery and the sexual subjugation of African American slave women is highlighted. Furthermore, as Gerda Lerner explains, *Beloved* in its feminist approach attempts to put an end to women's marginalization from history as so far it has been considered exclusively "in male-centered terms." (qtd. in Ali 1419)

In this paper I will discuss the devastating psychological effects of slavery on African American slaves' development of self-identity and the redefinition of slave women's role as mothers. In order to do so, I focus particularly on the character of Sethe and refer to DuBois' concept of double consciousness to demonstrate the dehumanizing effects of slavery on her self-perception and her inherent inferiority complex which is a result of living most of her life as a slave. Thus, firstly I will define the concept of double consciousness which helps understand DuBois' concept of blacks being born with a *veil*, that is, looking at themselves through the others' eyes. This can be perfectly applied to Sethe's case, who perceives herself through the eyes of the predominant white society which not only despises African Americans but also degrades them to the level of beasts and treats them as racially inferior. This notion is well illustrated in Sethe's violent reaction to the plantation owner, schoolteacher's threat of returning her and her children to slavery. Lastly, in the final chapter I will analyse how Sethe redefines the traditional concept of motherhood through violence.

1. A SHORT OVERVIEW OF THE LITERARY PANORAMA OF 18TH AND 19TH CENTURY SLAVE NARRATIVE AND *BELOVED*

Unlike the majority of 18th and 19th century male slaves narratives which generally omit African American women's ordeal during slavery, *Beloved* gives particular attention to this topic. With the remarkable exception of Harriet Jacobbs' *The Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), there are arguably no contemporary literary accounts that discuss the matter of sexual abuse which many black female slaves were victims of. *Beloved*, a novel where Sethe's personal life and the black community's history are intermingled, revises and aims to fill out the blank spaces in the early writings regarding African American women's sexual and racial discrimination. (Mondal)

The earlier slave narratives were written from a male perspective and they lacked any reference to African American women's sufferings. One of the crucial reasons for this exclusion was the literary conventions imposed by white male editorship. As a result, any allusions to hideous deeds against women by white men were removed so as to not offend the white readers' sensitivity. This marginalization of African American women from the official narrative of history creates the necessity to shed light upon one of the untold aspects of slavery: African American slave women's sexual objectification.

One crucial difference between *Beloved* and traditional slave narratives is the lack of allusion to the slaves' "interior life" as Morrison asserts in *It's like Growing up One More Time: Rediscovering Black History* (1974) (qtd. in Manzanias 254). The slaves were not entitled to education, and their illiteracy was used by the white society

to depict the African Americans as uncivilized. Therefore, when African American authors did begin to write they followed white writing conventions which prevented them from alluding to the bodily and psychological damage inflicted upon them by slavery. Furthermore, as suggested by Jesús Benito Sánchez and Ana Manzanar Calvo in their book *La revisión de la autobiografía del esclavo* (1994), earlier autobiographical accounts were characterized by the prevailing necessity to endow their writings with objectivity. As Morrison asserts in an interview their interior life was not depicted in order to “make the best representations of [African Americans] so that they, the other, would see us in our best light” (qtd. in Sandi 92). Therefore, Morrison wants to raise awareness about the historical past and speak for the African American women whose voices were silenced by a racist and sexist society.

Accordingly, black women who were constantly neglected in literature and history become the main characters in Morrison’s novels as it is apparent in *The Bluest Eye* (1970), *Sula* (1973) and *Beloved* (1987). In doing so, Morrison aims at breaking the “stony silence” imposed upon African American women by mainstream white literature (Mondal 2). In this regard, Morrison had declared that she decided to write for and about black women after realizing that “[African American women] didn’t exist in all of the literature [she] had read . . . [she] had to bear witness to what was not recorded” (qtd. in Sandi 92). We can claim that *Beloved* is a transgressive novel inasmuch as it revises early writings and as Morrison affirmed in *The Site of Memory*, “fill[s] the blanks that slave narratives left”, i.e., the issue of slave women and motherhood (qtd. in Sánchez and Calvo 258). This novel gives a new take on slavery from a female perspective.

Besides its feminist concerns, *Beloved* aims to humanize the figure of the black community. According to Lundén and Srigley, the institution of slavery was justified by

the African Americans' supposed inferiority due to their race (qtd. in Wising 4). Consequently, one of the most humiliating effects of slavery was slaves' degradation to cattle. African Americans were deprived of their dignity and humanity and when they were eventually given a voice, the literary conventions, as Morrison claims, prevented them from telling their lives "as lived not as imagined." (qtd. in Sánchez and Calvo 54)

In conclusion, Morrison's work is political in that she uses literature to provide an understanding of issues ignored by white American official history. By comparing *Beloved* to literary accounts written previously, we notice that *Beloved* intends to call the reader's attention to slavery's negative effects on the black community's sense of self-perception and self-esteem, a topic which will be elaborated upon in the second chapter of this paper. Also, as Madhu Dubey suggests in his article *The Politics of Genre in Beloved* (1999), just literacy was not sufficient for African Americans to prove themselves as equals before the eyes of white American society, as it was evident by the social and political upheavals in the second half of the nineteenth century.

2. DUBOIS'S CONCEPT OF DOUBLE CONSCIOUSNESS AND SLAVERY'S DEHUMANIZING EFFECTS ON AFRICAN AMERICAN'S SELF PERCEPTION

Considered racially inferior, African Americans were thought to be in need of "every care and guidance in the world to keep them from the cannibal life they preferred" (Morrison 177). The treatment of African Americans was such that they too subconsciously internalized the white community's derogatory view of them as their own. African Americans were denied civil and political rights and the right to education (Dubey). In this section I explain DuBois' concept of double consciousness and how slavery affected African Americans' self-perception and inhibited them from

developing a healthy self-esteem. And finally, I will address the harrowing effects of slavery on motherhood.

Double consciousness is a term used by DuBois in “Of Ours Spiritual Strivings” (2007). It is explained as

[a] sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (9)

Here, DuBois points out one of the major social problems that African Americans face in a predominantly white America: racial prejudice and disparagement. Double consciousness is the African Americans’ incapability of completely identifying themselves as either American or African due to what DuBois describes as the veil i.e. the racist lens through which the white American society perceives them and this makes it difficult for them to develop a unified identity of their own (Schaefer 3). This racially biased perception shapes and distorts African Americans’ identity and prevents both blacks and whites from seeing blacks as who they really are.

Slavery denied African Americans their humanity and integrity. The assumption that African Americans were inferior led them to discard their true identity and to project a personality of themselves which would be acceptable by white society in order to acquire a sense of belonging (DuBois 8). Consequently, the necessity of raising awareness regarding racial prejudices in America became crucial for African Americans in the process of learning to love themselves, embrace their African identity and to survive in a prejudiced society that discriminates them based on their race.

African American women had been traditionally excluded from the official history and as previously mentioned in Chapter I; they endured harassment and hardships from being separated from their children while the kids were still very young. They were denied the right to their own bodies and became mere “property that reproduced itself without cost” (Morrison 269). Slave women were to have as many children as possible so as to satisfy their master’s sexual demands and add more working hands to the plantations. Women were not given the choice if they wanted to be mothers or not and the consequences of slavery further altered both the notion of motherhood and womanhood. Despite being divested of political and civil rights, in *Beloved*, Sethe turns her vulnerable situation into one of empowerment and this will be analysed in Chapter III.

Slavery’s scars were not just physical like the tree that is engraved on Sethe’s back. Slavery also created psychological scars which continued to haunt African Americans even after they had attained freedom. Sethe was impelled to abandon Sweet Home, the plantation where she had lived as a slave before emancipation, on discovering that schoolteacher viewed her as an animal. Sethe states “anybody white could take your whole self for anything that came to mind. Not just work, kill, or maim you, but dirty you. Dirty you so bad you couldn’t like yourself anymore” (Morrison 295). This alludes to the brutalities of slavery inflicted upon the African body and more importantly it shows slavery’s psychological havocs upon African American’s self-perception and identity as individuals.

So ingrained was this derogatory opinion of their own selves in the minds of the African Americans that even after attaining freedom they were unable to get rid of it. This unconscious internalization of the white society’s racist view of them can be found in Paul D’s response after finding out that Sethe had killed her daughter Beloved to

prevent her from living an insufferable life of slavery. Paul D rebukes: “You got two feet, Sethe, not four,” (Morrison 194). This suggests that even for Paul D, Sethe’s act was similar to an animal’s brutal and irrational behaviour. Additionally, this reaction became, as Teresa Carbayo López de Pablo asserts in “The Configuration of Childhood Place in Toni Morrison’s the Bluest Eye” (2014), “a way of showing to what point a brutal racist system devaluing black life can be internalized” (25). Once African Americans were freed from the chains of slavery they had to fight against racial prejudices and discard their low self-esteem which was rooted into them by white American society due to their “second sight” (DuBois 9). As we will see in chapter III, violence would become a coping mechanism in Morrison’s novel against racial discrimination in society and I will analyze the ravages of slavery on African American’s self-perception and its deadly effects on motherhood.

3. SETHE AND BELOVED: CLAIMING MOTHERHOOD AND SUBJECTIVITY THROUGH VIOLENCE

Beloved (1987) is a novel in which fiction and history merge to bring forth the grave issue of slavery. Based on a historical character, *Beloved* tells the story of an ex-slave, Sethe, who kills her daughter so as to protect her from living an inhumane and degrading life under schoolteacher, the sadistic and cruel master of the plantation, Sweet Home. Under the threat and fear of returning to slavery, Sethe attempts to kill all her children to escape a life of terror but she only manages to cut the throat of her one baby girl, who in the story is referred to as Beloved. Although this desperate act always raises a moral question, I want to focus on the reasons behind Sethe’s violent deed and her role as a mother under the demeaning conditions of slavery. Therefore, in this chapter I will explore the psychological scars of slavery which deeply affects Sethe’s sense of

self-perception. Finally, I will discuss how Sethe resorting to violence allows for a redefinition of motherhood and subjectivity within a racist society where slaves were denied freedom, and African American slave women's bodies were objectified.

Violence is one of the elements which permeates Morrison's novels and challenges the societal expectations of women as weak and passive creatures. In *Beloved* violence is used to redefine the maternal role of African American slave women. As Benito Sánchez and Ana Manzanás explain in *La Estética del Recuerdo* (1994), "en condiciones extremas la muerte puede convertirse en un santuario frente a la vida" (266). Therefore, violence becomes a means of expressing the extremities of maternal love under the conditions of slavery. Although infanticide is an absolutely horrifying and condemnable act, Sethe decides to kill her daughter out of love in order to protect her from living under the same hardships that she endured during her life as a slave as critics Johanna Wising and Sandra Mayfield suggest. In the novel, we find an instance where Baby Suggs, Sethe's mother-in-law makes a very crucial remark highlighting the harsh realities of slavery, "[w]hat [Baby Suggs] called the nastiness of life was the shock she received upon learning that nobody stopped playing checkers just because the pieces included her children" (Morrison 28-29). By comparing African Americans to checker pieces, this objectification allows us to understand the level of deprivation and injustice the slaves suffered and how they were entirely robbed of their humanity.

Sethe's maternal violence as an act of love can be said to be incomprehensible to us, as it is explained by Christopher Peterson in his essay "*Beloved's Claim*"

[since] the normative vision of maternity tends to elevate the mother/child relation to an idealized field of ethical actions, infanticide is most often read either as an unintelligible aberration from normative kinship, or as an act of pure love, in which case it is thought to be completely intelligible. (qtd. in Putman 38)

Sethe argues with Paul D, another ex-slave: “It ain’t my job to know what’s worse. It’s my job to know what is and to keep [my children] away from what I know is terrible. I did that” (Morrison 194). Sethe tries to save her children from leading a dehumanizing life in an abusive society. Therefore, the violence of infanticide becomes an unlikely way of expressing maternal love demonstrated in its most despairing form.

This extreme reaction on Sethe’s part can be connected to W. E. B. DuBois’s notion of double consciousness where one looks at self through the other’s perception of him/her. So far, African American women have been subdued and defined solely by their reproductive value. However, Sethe refuses to adhere to this definition which only sees her as a procreative vessel. Sethe, born to a slave mother, was denied the conventional maternal love and care as a result of growing up in an inhumane environment of the plantation. A positive upbringing which is fundamental for the development of a healthy identity is therefore denied to her. Instead, she develops a double consciousness where she begins to see herself as inferior due to her race, and as she does not want her children to have a similar fate and get abused and objectified by the white man, she attempts to end their lives (Putman 39). As Sethe is mistreated and exposed to violence during her lifetime, she internalizes it and uses it as a survival mechanism in a racist and prejudiced society which labels African Americans ethnically inferior, as explained by Teresa Carbayo López de Pablo in her essay “The Configuration of Childhood in Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*” (2014). Sethe projects onto her children the violence inflicted upon her by the merciless, white, male schoolteacher. (Putman 26)

As I have mentioned earlier, women were treated as objects of sexual gratification and child bearing vessels. The choice of becoming a mother was a right which was denied to slave women. Their bodies were objectified to such an extent

[t]hat anybody white could take your whole self for anything that came to mind. Not just work, kill, or maim you, but dirty you. Dirty you so bad you forgot who you were and couldn't think it up. . . . Whites might dirty *her* all right, but no her best thing, her beautiful magical best thing—the part of her that was clean. (Morrison 296)

These lines convey perfectly how the bodies of black women slaves were besmirched and assaulted by white men as per their fancy. Consequently, Sethe decides that death is preferable over a life of pain and humiliation under the precarious conditions of slavery.

Not only were African American women slaves deprived of their most basic civil rights, they were also not permitted to have any subjectivity. African American women slaves were denied the right to take care of their children as mothers were separated from their children at a very early age. Though it is understood that African American women's social situation was different from that of white women's but so was their role as a mother, the cruelty of slavery was such that even a mother and her child were not allowed to stay together. As Putman explains, motherhood becomes the means through which Sethe redefines and asserts her subjectivity by deciding the future of her children (38). In doing so, she defies the traditional concept of women as passive and submissive beings as perceived by a patriarchal society which subjugates women for their gender.

In conclusion, violence becomes a weapon for challenging the societal expectations and stereotypes related to African American women and motherhood, and it also serves as a tool for opposing sexual confinement in a society which discriminates its people on the basis of their gender and race. Morrison uses fiction masterfully to show the damaging effect of slavery on motherhood. Hence, through maternal violence Sethe is able to break out of the bonds of objectification and subvert the conventional notion of motherhood thereby asserting herself as an autonomous and independent subject. Unlike

the majority of African American women slaves Sethe rebels against her treatment as an animal and refuses to be deprived of her rights as a human. Thus, Sethe becomes an empowered woman who takes the forbidden freedom to decide over the future and the lives of her children even though exercising that freedom implies sacrificing her own kinship. Therefore, violence takes a new dimension in Morrison's *Beloved*: an expression of ultimate maternal love.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, one can assert that slavery had serious damaging effects on African American's self-perception and it also subverted the conventional concept of motherhood for African American women. In *Beloved*, Morrison shows us the inhumane life that African Americans had to live for centuries. The book takes the reader on a revealing journey to this terrifying past and makes us aware of the horrors of slavery allowing one to approach racial problems from a new perspective. As Pradip Mondal says: "before a stable future can be attained we must confront and decipher the "ghosts" of the past" (5). Consequently, it can be argued that this retrospection on slavery becomes a healing process which makes it possible for African Americans to understand the racial prejudices held against them thereby enabling the black community to challenge the discriminations they face due to their race.

Likewise slavery not only had a pivotal role to play in African American's own sense of self-perception as individuals but also it affected the way in which African American slave women experienced motherhood differently. Usually, slave women were forced to abandon their children, leaving them exposed to the disorderly path of forging an identity for themselves on their own. The white American society's treatment

of them as inferior and detestable human beings resulted in African Americans viewing themselves in a similar manner and hence prevented them from developing a positive, unified self. It also affected the way in which they interacted with others, therefore, African Americans' behaviour with *the other* can be explained by the veil to which W. E. B. Dubois refers in his book.

Motherhood acquires a fatal dimension in *Beloved* by challenging the moral conventions. Violence emerges as a rebellious element through which Sethe defies the social, racial and gender superiority of the white man. It also becomes a decisive element in her transition from object to subject as it allows her to take control of her life. Thus, by using violence Sethe's identity is no longer bound to her reproductive worth and she attains the power to make a decision regarding her own life and that of her children's.

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